

## ■ safe community



by David Thomas

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David Thomas is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Hong Kong Police, consultant to INTERPOL and the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*. He has recently formed ISECA, the *Independent Security Agency* here in the Algarve, to help authorities and the community prevent crime. This is his first in a series of articles about crime prevention.

# Reporting suspicious activities and crime online

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Perhaps one of Portugal's most guarded secrets is that it is possible to report some crime online, thus avoiding lengthy visits to police stations. However, before outlining how to do this, it is first necessary to see how crime can be prevented in the first place by the prompt reporting of suspicious activities to the police.

## How to report suspicious activities

Whereas *Safe Communities Algarve* has frequently stressed through these features and on its website the importance of passing details of suspicious activities to the police, I occasionally get complaints from residents that when they have telephoned to report something suspicious, "nothing happens".

This situation is disappointing as such information is badly needed and invariably is helpful in solving crime and bringing criminals to justice. For instance in some 80% of indoor residential robberies, the culprits escape by using a vehicle.

Invariably when robbers plan their crime they monitor the potential victim's activities beforehand, perhaps using the same vehicle as they intend to use in carrying out the crime. So making a note of a suspicious vehicle, including importantly its registration number and its occupant(s), and reporting this could just help in prevent a serious crime.

There is little doubt that many crimes can be prevented, or if already taken place, can be detected, by the prompt reporting of suspicious activities. This works because residents normally have an intimate knowledge of what goes on in their neighbourhood, what is normal and, more importantly, what is not.

Police, on the other hand, unless living in the area, have to rely on information passed to them during patrols or by residents contacting them. The police really need your help and by passing information regarding suspicious activity, you are doing both yourself a favour as well as your neighbours.

I have recently discussed the reporting of suspicious activities with GNR commanders and the consensus throughout the Algarve is as follows: it is best to report using email to the local police station, rather than by telephone unless, of course, it is an emergency.

I have been assured that all emails are read and action taken accordingly. In fact, several commanders have mentioned to me that if you mark the email message to "The attention of the Commander" then the message will certainly be passed to him.

I therefore suggest that you do this as all of the commanders read English so there should be no problem. Certainly their response when I have raised this issue has been very positive and helpful as they are keen to provide a good service. This does not mean, however, that it will be necessary, in response to this

information, to always visit you – the fact that they have received vital information is what is required and this will be passed to those officers undertaking crime investigation work.

The email addresses of all GNR stations in the Algarve are available on the *Safe Communities Algarve* website under 'Crime Prevention and Downloads – GNR General'.

So to help keep your village safe become the eyes and ears of the GNR and report suspicious activities with as many details as possible to the GNR using this means.

## How to report crime online

One of the reasons why people do not report minor crime is because they do not wish to spend 2-3 hours at a police station making a crime complaint.

The reason why this takes so long is invariably because the computer system they use is very slow and if

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you try and enter data too quickly the system often locks up. I have discussed this with the GNR, they realise the current length of processing time is unacceptable and are currently taking steps to try and resolve the issue.

It is however possible to report certain crimes online through an initiative by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Unfortunately, very few Portuguese and foreign residents know of this service as it is difficult to find on the GNR and PSP websites and does not appear to have been promoted widely.

In fact, in 2011, less than 900 people reported crime in this way, although some 30% of those who did made reports of theft.

So how good is the system? *Safe Communities Algarve* has compared this system here in Portugal with certain other countries including the UK, and has found it to be more comprehensive, allows reporting of a greater number of crimes, and has more features than the other countries examined.

For example, in the UK, you can only report four crimes online whereas here in Portugal it is 18. These include Theft, Fraud, Domestic Violence and Minor Assault as well as several immigration offences, the latter under the jurisdiction of SEF.

Serious crimes including those that may require forensic follow up action are not included as is the case in all other countries. The service covers the whole of Portugal including both cities and rural

areas covered by the PSP and GNR respectively. One challenge, however, is that the system is only in Portuguese making it virtually impossible for non-Portuguese readers to use it.

*Safe Communities Algarve* has changed this, however, by introducing a new service on its website under the menu "Online Crime Reporting". This provides the eight step operating instructions, printable templates, "eligible crimes" including crime definitions and privacy statements all in English. All you have to do is print out the English downloads and use these to guide you through the system on the MIA website. All eligible crimes are listed in English so simply click on these and you can start accessing the system.

There is also a direct one-stop link to the MIA website so if you are able to understand written Portuguese you can simply directly access the system. There is also a direct link to a video tutorial in Portuguese.

Notwithstanding this within 48 hours of making the report, it is necessary to visit a police station or SEF for the purpose of verifying your identification. However, I have been informed that this is a quick and simple process which only takes a few minutes.

This service has been developed to help foreign residents and has taken some work to introduce. I am sure there are areas where further improvements can be made and I hope readers will find this useful. Readers are reminded that this system should not be used in an emergency or when actually witnessing a crime taking place, in which case you should contact the emergency services.

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